

ISSUE: Boarding Schools and Sun Dance and Potlatch Prohibition – Forced Assimilation

BACKGROUND: Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries Native Americans were subjected to many types of assimilationist programs. The colonizing and ever expanding European population of “Americans” believed that the Indian interest would be best served if the native people could be “civilized” and dissuaded from their “paganism”. In order to achieve these ends, the U.S. government and other white agencies developed boarding schools and banned many Native American traditional practices including the Sun Dance and the potlatch, labeling them “barbaric” and “heathen”. Ironically the United States constitution itself was modeled after Iroquois leadership practices, most Indian tribes did not participate in any type of death penalty or brutal discipline measures, and Indians bathed daily unlike the “Americans” of that day. In addition ceremonies like the potlatch, which promoted the moral practice of wealth gained through generosity, and the Sun Dance, which was an ultimate expression of discipline and desire for purity, were labeled “barbarian” by a culture that practiced a form of genocide against Indian people, equal in scale to the Holocaust, in pursuit of material wealth through oppression.

One of the most impacting experiences of the early Reservation Period for Native children was the boarding school. Boarding schools designed to “civilize and Christianize the children of pagans” often took children by force from their parents, forbid them to speak their native languages, cut off their traditional long hair, and kept them away from home for years at a time. Many Native American children did not see their homes and families again until they had become adults. Times like these greatly influenced the future tribal response to the public educational systems introduced later. The parents and children of those sent to boarding schools usually have strong feelings about education and have communicated these feelings and experiences to present generations.

EXAMPLE LESSONS:

Title: The Price of Assimilation – What It Costs a Society When Everyone is the Same

Standard: Analyze human experience and cultural expression (e.g. language, literature, arts, traditions, beliefs, spirituality, values, behavior) and create a product which illustrates an integrated view of a specific culture. Analyze and evaluate the ways various groups (e.g. social, political, cultural) meet human needs and concerns (e.g. individual needs, common good) and contribute to personal identity. Analyze the conflicts resulting from cultural assimilation and cultural preservation among various ethnic and racial groups in Montana, the United States, and the world. Analyze the interactions of individuals, groups and institutions in society (e.g. social mobility, class conflict, globalization).

Grade Level: This can be adapted for 4th, 8th, or 11th grades.

Lesson: Students will identify ways that a society promotes assimilation and examine areas where it still occurs in our present culture. Students will also assess the value of assimilation. Why do we feel people should be the same or do the same things? What do we lose as a society if everyone conforms to the same image or idea? Why did the early “Americans” feel assimilation was best? What did this policy cost our nation? How did attempts at assimilation affect the people involved? (psychological, social, governmental, physical effects)

1. This lesson is best limited to one day or class period with younger students. It has been done with students as young as first grade, but is somewhat controversial because sometimes very young children do not have the reasoning skills necessary to understand the purpose of the lesson. Fourth grade and above should understand without issue.
2. Divide the class into groups by eye color. Give each group a colored armband or other group signifier. Construct a strict set of social rules i.e. The blue group always goes to lunch first. The brown group cleans up after every project. The blue group gets all the pens and pencils they need. The Green group can only use one crayon. Etc. Be sure that your rules reflect a social hierarchy that causes students to take positions or actions according to your rules. Use forms of authority to enforce the rules. For instance if you have Brown eyes, say “I have brown eyes and I know brown eyed people are the best.”
3. Change it all around. Invite the principal, who has blue eyes, to reestablish a new social order. Continue making changes until all the children have had a chance to participate as the group at the top of the social ladder and the group at the bottom.
4. To make the game a further challenge, add rules that can lead to demotion. For instance, if a person of high rank is seen hanging out with a person/people of low rank too often, he/she will be demoted one class because he/she obviously has no concern for reputation in associating with people of poor character.

Assessment:

1. After finishing the game ask students to journal their answer to questions like these: How did you feel as a person of highest rank? How did you feel as a person of lower rank? Were there times when you felt like you couldn't control your own life? Were there times when you felt like you were treated unfairly? What makes treatment unfair? Did you feel like you changed the way you acted when your social position changed? Did you ever feel limited in what you could achieve? Who made the rules of your society? Were they just or unjust rules? What purpose did the rules serve? Does a society need rules to function? If yes, what kinds of rules are necessary? If no, how does a society function without rules? In American society, what rules do we live by? Who made these rules? Are these rules just or unjust? What do our rules reflect about our society?
2. Introduce poems and readings about the era in America when white society believed that it could impose its rules on Native American people. Discuss the feelings expressed in the literature and then compare these with the feelings students had during the game. Students will be able to compare the social

structure of this era in time with our current social structure and answer the questions from the above step in reference to the early Reservation Period.

Suggested Readings:

The Help Rain Gives Me, a poem from the book Rising Voices, written by a 10th grade Inuit boarding school student.

From the book Native American Testimony, edited by Peter Nabokov, the following titles:

Responsive and Resistant Students – Ellis B. Childers, Creek; Lone Wolf, Blackfeet

He Is Not One of Us – Sun Elk, Taos Pueblo

What Harm Is in Our Sun-dance? – Anonymous, Blackfoot

We Will Dance – Anonymous, Kwakiutl

Dr. Fewkes Plays Like a Child – Edmund Nequatewa, Hopi

Judge Wooden Legs Keeps One Wife – Wooden Leg, Northern Cheyenne

I Heard the Owl Call My Name, by Margaret Craven